

[Domestic Workers' Union]

Beliefs and Customs - Folk Stuff

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 12 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street, N.Y.C.

DATE February 7, 1939

SUBJECT Domestic Workers' Union

1. Date and time of interview February 2, 1939 12:30 P.M. to 2:30 P.M.
2. Place of interview 241 West 84th Street, N.Y.C.
3. Name and address of informant Dora Jones; Executive Secretary Domestic Worker's Union.
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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This is a continuation of the story submitted February 2, 1939. Subject: Domestic Workers.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Vivian Morris

ADDRESS 225 West 130th Street, N.Y.C.

DATE February 7, 1939

SUBJECT Domestic Workers' Union

The Domestic Workers Union is located in the heart of Yorkville, 241 East 84th Street. It was just past the noon hour when Rose Reed conducted me to this temple of fidelity, which housed a group of unceasing workers who delegate their lives to providing ways and means of lifting the level of the shamefully neglected domestic workers.

As we entered, Rose inquired of a sharp eyed nimble, white worker, who was deftly cutting stencils for a batch of petitions, as to the approximate hour that Miss Jones (the executive Secretary) would be in. She continued working but answered in a polite affable tone, that Miss Jones was expected momentarily and asked us to inspect the headquarters pending any tardiness on the part of Miss Jones.

I noted that there was a group of women seated around a large table drinking coffee and eating sandwiches which were prepared by a pleasant looking woman who stood over a gas stove snugly situated in a corner, making it imperceptible from the big front office

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where official business was carried on. When I looked at Rose with a non-comprehending expression on my face, she promptly enlightened my befuddled brain by telling me that this was a daily procedure. The women who had come for days work and had not succeeded in finding it, or the part-time job-seekers, were allowed free use of the gas stove and cooking utensils.

I marvelled at the varied tasks that the women pursued between bits of sandwiches and sips of coffee. Some chatted in sincere animated tones about the frankly exposing article appearing in a local tabloid, written by Damon Runyon. It scathingly denounced the housewives who work their maids lengthy, unhumane hours at a starvation wage level. Every scalding word was caught by straining ears, as the smooth toned young girl, whose sole ambitions is to emulate Marion Anderson, read them off for the older women some who had "left their glasses at home" and others who admitted that they could not read.

A few of the group haltingly tried to remedy their defective reading; another having finished her meal, had pushed her chair back from the table and was poring over a booklet on elementary arithmetic. It was enlightening to know that these women, instead of working themselves up to a dither because they had not gotten a job, used their leisure time to further their mental faculties.

After the article by Mr. Runyon had been duly discussed it was decided that the article was to be clipped from the paper and pinned to the bulletin board. While the young lady was pinning the article on, I ventured to look at the very informative bulletin board. There were numerous clippings, from papers, pamphlets and periodicals pertaining to the domestic situation the country over. There were notices of bills to be presented, bills that had been presented, and petitions to be signed by the members of the union. Directly in front of the bulletin board was a well stocked book case with many trade union books, pamphlets, union activities periodicals, and a few popular fictions.

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The young lady having finished her petitions, surveyed them with pride, and beckoned to me saying, "What do you think of the petition?"

I read the heading of the petition, the gist of which was a plea to the members of the state assembly to limit the domestic workers to a ten hour day - a sixty hour week, a fifteen dollar minimum wage, days work at \$3.50 per and an hour for lunch, and agitation for the inclusion of domestic workers in the Social Security Act, in view of the fact that eighty percent of the Negro women workers are employed as domestic servants. I remarked that this was a giant stride toward the bettering of conditions among an overlooked group.

At about this time, Dora Jones came in. She was a plump, energetic, round faced Negro woman with all-engulfing eyes. The worker who had been running off the petitions, (the educational director) introduced me to Miss Jones. Impatient to learn about the origin of the union, I immediately acquired of its beginning. With pleasant alacrity Miss Jones complied with my hasty request, "Our union is eight years old. It was started by a group of Finns and a few Negroes in Harlem, who saw the necessity for a fight against exploitation of Negro domestics. Until 1935 the office was located in the Finnish neighborhood, but the hunger riots of Harlem on March 19, 1935 marked the demolishing of the office by the rioters. In 1936 we set up the Domestic Workers Union Local 149 A. F. of L. in this building. We have grown not spectacularly, but at a steady clip. The members we get - we hold. "She waved her hand toward the group, which was collectively folding a bundle 4 of letters that were to be sent out to the various members. "One big happy family," she smiled.

"Now Miss Jones," I hesitantly interposed, "I want to know your stand on the various slave marts—?"

"I'm glad you brought that up," she interrupted. "That problem has been a thorn in our side for many a day, but I think we have a solution for this dilemma." We have sent out a suggestion to the Rabbiss' in the various synagogues, and white clergymen, that they

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should stress to their congregation that they should stop hiring the girls from the slave marts at starvation wages, and have an organization set up and supervised by the church members in the church, or some community house in the neighborhood, and let the girls come there and wait for jobs. We don't stop here but we suggest that a minimum wage law be agreed upon by arbitration and this will help do away with a bans to New York humanitarianism, the slave mart.

But, this will not entirely erase domestic slavery; so, we sent out letters to the ministers of the Negro churches where these habitues of the slave mart attend, and urged them to impress upon these women the direct harm they do to themselves and others by going to these slave marts; and accepting the low wages that these heartless employers offer them. We want the pastors to insist that they go to these places, that I am confident will be set up by the cooperation that will be given us by the Rabbis and white clergymen. In this fashion, having experienced a taste of fair wages and conditions, they'll want better conditions — and that's where we, the union come in.”

I reflected for a while and then heartily agreed with Miss Jones; she had a darn good insight on the solution to the 5 slave mart problem. She is dead sure that the necessary cooperation from the clergy and fair minded people in the mart districts is forth coming, and this certainly will stamp out of existence those heinous bogeys - slave marts.